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Shut Up and Simplify:
The Writing Process of *Shut Up and Sing*

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE

Supervisor: _____
Richard Lewis

Stuart Kelban

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The Writing Process of *Shut Up and Sing***

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John Gregory Bellina

Report

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Abstract

**Shut Up and Simplify:
The Writing Process of *Shut Up and Sing***

by

**John Gregory Bellina, MFA
The University of Texas at Austin, 2013
SUPERVISOR: Richard Lewis**

This report documents the initial inspiration, development, and rewrites that went into the creation of John Gregory Bellina's screenplay *Shut Up and Sing*. Furthermore, the following pages trace the evolution of the author's writing during the entirety of his program experience.

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Chapter 1: Getting Real

During the Summer of 2012, I had the opportunity to serve as a production assistant on the second season of Fox's singing competition show *The X-Factor* at the Frank Erwin Center in Austin. From reality to shows to major blockbusters, I had been a production assistant before on sets in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, but this was by far the most interesting gig I'd ever gotten. These types of shows need around fifty production assistants to run smoothly, and each P.A. is designated a specific task; from escorting "talent" from a holding room to stage, signing people in – even simply making sure people knew where the restrooms are located. With all the excitement of checking a list to see what role I'd landed in the school play, I was bewildered to find my name on the call sheet in its own separate block from the rest of P.A.'s with the vague title "sound" next to it. I soon discovered that I was in fact in charge of playing the audition tracks for each contestant that week. My job was essentially to watch a monitor, read the look on judge Simon Cowell's face when he was ready for the contestant to sing, and then hit the track. I was excited. I felt like I was part of the show.

I've never really watched these singing competition shows, though my parents are avid watchers of not only *American Idol*, but *The Voice*, as well as *The X-Factor*. Sitting backstage and witnessing contestants pour their hearts out was mesmerizing to me. I would laugh out loud whenever Simon would harass a contestant as though I was sitting at home on the couch with popcorn. Then, of course, I'd quickly look around to make sure that no one saw me enjoying myself.

(Happiness on set is frowned upon.) I began to understand why millions of Americans found such programming fascinating. I had a list of every upcoming contestant featuring a headshot and a bit of info. I noticed an “x” next to some of the contestants’ names, and was curious as to what this might mean. I soon discovered exactly what it meant. The first contestant with an “x” next to their name came on stage and threw glitter from his pockets. The second, had to be carried off of stage for being so overweight and out-of-shape. The third was a bald man in his late forties who sang an original pop song piece called “Candy Girl.” I noticed a pattern here. How had these people even been cleared to perform? Clearly, they weren’t singers. Something was awry. Then, I had my epiphany. I was duped like the rest of America. I thought these people were real, that they weren’t planted on the show. The first seed of inspiration was planted.

The second seed came from my own participation in the contest’s process. These contestants take the stage shaky and nervous to say the least. This arena is packed with nearly fifty-thousand spectators. Twenty feet away at the judges’ table, Britney Spears is watching them with an aloof, frightening face. With so much pressure, I came to realize the importance of my role as essentially the “DJ.” Each second counts. A contestant takes the stage, tells a little about themselves, sometimes mentions what they’d do with the five-million dollar cash prize, and then Simon will ask them what song they’re singing. This is the tricky part – I had a CD with a handful of tracks from each contestant. Often, the contestant would change their mind at the last second and decide to go with a

different song. I was forced to react on the fly and get the song going with the least amount of awkward silence possible. Sometimes, I'd hit play, and the track itself would have five seconds of silence at the opening. Those moments had me reflecting. Each one of those seconds feels like an hour for a contestant. One little thing could go wrong and shatter their nerves to pieces before they even sing their first note. Typically, my experience on set was running errands – coffee, copies, and such. I'd never held such power before. Even if I *hadn't* really screwed up, a really loony contestant could blame me regardless, needing to point the finger at someone for their humiliating failure. They could spite me and curse my name for the rest of their lives. As I sat backstage, watching rejected contestants leave the stage heartbroken, hugging their families and weeping, I realized that there was perhaps some realness to this reality business after all.

Chapter 2: Merging the Surreal with Reality

After an interesting week of work, I got a T-shirt and I got an idea. I did like I always did (and still do) when a script idea is premature and I'm excited about it— I pitched it to friends before it was ready. I obsessed over the thought that one of these contestants could be rejected and berated on national television and really take it to heart. What if they were so upset, that they made it their sole objective to humiliate the judges whose role for years had been to harass and bash others? I'm not insinuating that *The X-Factor* was a cruel show, by any means. After ten years of competition shows like this existing, contestants who signed up were fully aware of what they were getting themselves into. But what if there was a singing show so cruel, that it was notorious for its taunting and mocking of purposefully handpicked zany contestants? And what if one of those zany contestants decided to go Hans Gruber and take over the whole place?

So, I went to my thinking space: my bed. Ever since I was a kid I've had the same method of escaping into stories and adventures. I'd watch an episode of my favorite cartoon or show, and disappear into my room for hours. I had won this lop-sided coca cola plush ball at a local fair in my small town. I'd take that ball, lay on my bed and toss it up and down in the air. It's as if the ball's movement spurred my brain into action – Wolverine would immediately be on some mission that took place after the *X-Men* credits had rolled. I'm a firm believer in keeping childhood close to your heart as a writer, and thus this process followed me into adulthood. The ball, unfortunately, is now tattered and

threadbare, but I'm happy to report that my ideas have expanded from *Power Rangers* into more mature fare. Anyway, I lay in bed, thinking of ideas for this vile reality show. It needed to be rude and reflect the cruelty of the show. Thus, I came up with the title of the show: *Shut Up and Sing*.

During that same Summer, I spent a bit of time in my hometown. I grew up in a small, three-stoplight town with less than seven thousand people in southern Louisiana. Nostalgia had been plaguing me for years by this point, but those trips home always have a knack for sending me on a mostly unhealthy trip down memory lane. Prom pictures are still framed in my old bedroom featuring me and the longest girlfriend I've ever had. That first love; the one before I turned jaded and pessimistic, always thinking about when a relationship is going to end before it even begins. This trip home was especially strange. My friends were getting engaged, settling down. I got a glimpse at what my life would have been like had I stayed in my home state rather than making the terrifying leap to Austin for grad school. Everyone seemed happy, having given into what was expected of them. Louisiana always felt as though it were a place where everything: jobs, marriage, kids, had a strict schedule. If it's what your parents did, you do it, too. If it's what your parents believe, you believe it as well.

While lost in my own head, I never once reconsidered my career path. I knew that there was nothing else I would rather do with my life, and was also fully aware that the regret of not giving screenwriting my all would be more detrimental than any other life choice I could possibly make. However, I *did*

reconsider my relationship choices in life. All this wedding fever had me thinking: Had I perhaps already passed up the opportunity to be with the right girl? I'd officially journeyed into the second half of my twenties and began the dreadful approach to my thirties, and this thought gave me quite a scare. Needless to say, I'd gotten infected with my hometown virus, for a while believing that there was no life outside of its lazily marked city limits. I began to think that if I had met "the one" in my life, then it had probably already happened.

My ex-girlfriend was in Korea at the time, teaching abroad for two years. In my desperation, I scrambled to find a way to communicate with her. For two passionate nights staring at my phone's screen, I laid out all the guilt I had for leaving her years prior, at a time early in college when I thought I needed to try seeing more women. Having done so, (not *that* many) I felt as though I were at a place where I was ready to come back to what we had and settle down. A part of me always felt as though we'd get back together. My ex was in a relationship at the time, however, through my firm dedication to the cause, she considered throwing everything away and giving us another shot. That's when it hit me. Not only a heavy sense of guilt but the epiphany that first loves are like a drug you leave behind. For a few days my ex and I were on this high, remembering the way it used to be and believing, at least for a moment, that we could fall right back into the simplicity of it all. We were foolish, and luckily (for everyone involved) we realized the error of our ways before going through with it. Thus, I

wanted to capture such madness on the page. A protagonist, so in love with the past, that he refuses to move forward and make progress in the present.

I read that Woody Allen keeps a drawer full of various notes and story ideas. Imitating my idol, I too, wrote down any and all ideas for jokes and characters. But the ones that stuck with me the most were these two stories of love and loss: of people scorned and those seeking redemption or their moment to shine. Typically, I merge ideas I have together to form a bigger picture, and this concept proved no different. I wanted a protagonist who felt guilty for his mistake years prior in coldly dumping his first love, and had one day to win her back. I wanted an antagonist who was rejected by a cruel competition show for years, and today was the day she decided to take her stand and take her fame by force. Most importantly, I wanted a script that wasn't low budget, that was not only marketable, but pitch-able.

My first two screenplays were low budget, small town dramas that explored deep coming of age issues with regards to the loss or potential loss of a loved one. Not only did I want to take a break from melodramatic tones, but I also wanted an idea that could be pitched in one sentence. I wanted a broad concept screenplay for a change that was easily accessible. So, I decided I was writing *Pitch Perfect* meets *Die Hard*: A singing competition hostage situation. I wanted to capture this idea that everyone in the screenplay, from the protagonist to the villain, desires to make it to Hollywood, but something is preventing him or her. Thus, my working title was *Hollywood Rejects*. I soon came to feel that entitling a

script in such a way essentially ensured that it would never make it far in competitions. The title basically asks the reader to toss it aside into the “reject” pile. Thus, I went with the name of the singing competition as the title of the script, and *Shut Up and Sing* was born.

Chapter 3: Protagonist's Progression / The Heart of the Story

The outline for *Shut Up and Sing* was the most extensive one I'd written at the time, and my sole purpose was to have incredible foresight and avoid problems that would wind up on cut from the script or problematic down the road. This is useful to a degree, but as this essay will come to reveal, nearly an impossible mission to successfully accomplish in a satisfying manner. The name "Lee" came from a distaste I acquired for multi-syllabic names which I had foolishly written into my first two scripts. Lee became the short-named, dim-witted hero of my story. In my drawer of Woody Allen ideas, (not Woody Allen quality, of course) one of the potential character occupations I had listed was airport bartender in a hometown. I thought it'd be interesting to have a character who's never left home, stuck in the same place, watching everyone leave on their various trips and getaways. However, another lesson I learned from previous screenwriting endeavors was to get to the crux of my story immediately and really grab the reader's attention. Thus, I opted to leave Lee's occupation in the background without actually showing it on the page. This is typically difficult for me, especially when I'm fascinated by a concept. While I'm aware that understanding Lee's character as an airport bartender is helpful in bringing his voice to the page, I have a hard time not including a fun scene involving Lee at the airport to establish the story. I wanted this story to capture a moment, one day, from beginning to end, and I wanted the reader to feel as though they'd lived through the hours of adventure. Thus, I started right at the heart of the story, with

Lee arriving at an arena in Atlanta Georgia on the morning that *Shut Up and Sing* had come to town for auditions.

I have a habit of relying too heavily upon the “write what you know” style of storytelling, especially when it comes to first drafts. I tend to use it as a crutch when pressed for time, instead of taking longer to ruminate and really spin an experience in a new and exciting way. Thus, Lee’s character began as a Production Assistant. He was still an airport bartender, but he had landed the job just for the sake of meeting his ex-girlfriend who works on the show: Charlotte. That stretch for plausibility alone should have been enough of a red flag. And yet, I persisted. This thread proved problematic for multiple reasons. First off, it diminished the stakes in the first act. If Lee screws up, he gets fired, but so what? He’s already made it into the building, so half the battle is already won. I tried to make it work, having Lee designated to be in charge of contestants’ performance music, thus he was trapped in one spot and unable to seek out Charlotte. But no one wants to watch a guy stuck in one spot, especially when nothing visibly is imprisoning him. I wanted Lee to be responsible for the music, so that, much like my real-life fear, if he screwed up, he would be to blame for the wrath of the rejected contestant whom he flustered. I was obsessed with this thought that Lee was, in a roundabout way, the cause for the hostage situation that transpires -- an idea I still found appealing after multiple drafts.

When I got to the actual page-writing process, I saw the error of my ways, and found a solution that tidied things up a bit. What if Lee wormed his way into

being a contestant? Better yet, what if he wasn't a contestant, and fakes it, heightening the stakes and putting his plan in jeopardy if he winds up exposed? I came to believe that a decent way to make Lee charming in the opening pages, is to have him pour his lovesick heart out on stage, professing his love for Charlotte and asking her to take him back while she watches with her coworkers from the control room. But how would he directly affect Eileen, the rejected contestant, and be construed as the cause of her full-scale vengeance? I decided to have Lee on the outside of the building, no contestant credentials, just a spectator trying to break his way in. He does so, chased by security guards, and decides his only chance to reach out to Charlotte is to take the stage and sing his heart out. But by doing so, he bumps the performance of Eileen, who goes on after him only to botch her performance and find herself belittled by the cruel judges. Thus, having been rejected from Hollywood, she goes with plan b: taking over the show at gunpoint.

What's a lovesick protagonist without his love interest? That's where Charlotte comes into play. I wanted her to be tough, motivated, and ambitious: everything that Lee's not. I originally had her storyline written that she and Lee had broken up during their senior year of high school. Lee had left her because he wanted to explore other options. She took her rejection and decided to put all of her focus and energy into her career, attending UCLA and rising in the ranks of the television industry. Meanwhile, Lee did just the opposite, staying in state in Georgia, blowing off college, and longing for better, simpler times with Charlotte

when he had it all figured out. Charlotte, a production manager on *Shut Up and Sing*, returns to her hometown of Atlanta for one day only, putting a ticking clock on Lee to make a move and win her back before she's whisked away on tour with the competition to another major city. Seeking to create another obstacle and make Charlotte more difficult for Lee to woo, I borrowed from a typical romantic comedy trope and decided that she would be in a relationship with the show's egotistical producer, Jonah. Charlotte, would therefore, have every reason to reject Lee's attempts to win her back. Not only did he break her heart and dump her, but she's in a committed relationship.

I came to learn that I overcompensated in trying to keep certain plot details in the background. In the original outline, it's never revealed *why* or *how* Lee screwed up with Charlotte, just that they had broken up years prior. While this certainly saved page space, I ultimately felt that the motivation driving the story was too hidden and required the reader to have too much patience, a luxury that isn't often affordable for writers. So, imitating a recent comedy that I thoroughly enjoyed: *21 Jump Street*, I decided to kick off the script with the break-up between Lee and Charlotte back in high-school. Additionally, through feedback and workshop of my first draft, I discovered that the motivation for Lee wanting to win Charlotte back wasn't quite powerful enough. While I initially thought that *him* dumping *her* and seeking redemption would play as an interesting take on the romantic comedy, it's hard to really emotionally invest in his quest to right things. Furthermore, making the protagonist dump his ex

because he wanted to explore other options doesn't make him the most likable guy (though I figured it left him room to change and grow by the end of the story). It's a tough tight-rope to walk to make your character lovable enough to get behind, but terrible enough to require a big change or a lesson to learn. It took some tweaking of Charlotte's character quite a bit, but for my latest draft, I discovered a solution that I believe makes Lee a loveable screw-up.

I rewrote Charlotte to be an aspiring singer with terrible stage fright. She's got a great voice, but no one knows it because she never worked up to nerve to let it shine. So, the story begins at prom in 2008, where Lee comes up with a harebrained scheme to show off his girlfriend Charlotte's voice to his classmates and help her take that first step and conquer her fear. With a microphone planted in the showers that'll allow the whole gym to hear her sing, Lee hopes to get her to belt out a song. Unfortunately, things go awry when she starts making moves on him and her foul-mouthed flirting and foreplay are heard by the whole student congregation over the loudspeaker. Discovering this, Charlotte is humiliated beyond belief, and never forgives Lee. Following the paradigm of *21 Jump Street* that builds toward an obvious climax set up in the first five minutes gave me a clear, full-circle goal to work toward by the end of the story: Lee must redeem himself through Charlotte's singing at the climax. I decided to keep most of the other elements regarding Charlotte's character in place: she's still tough, still determined, and still climbed through the ranks of the television industry to be production manager on *Shut Up and Sing*. The music is still in her deep down,

and through the voice competition show, she's part of the singing world.

However, she keeps a safe distance due to the traumatic experience brought about by Lee.

Since, the break-up was a rough one and there's a hostage situation to deal with, I opted to lose one more obstacle regarding Lee's quest for Charlotte's heart. I came to feel that Jonah, the cruel producer of the show serving as the boyfriend of Charlotte made it seem as though she had to sleep her way to the top of the totem pole, when really, I wanted her to simply have worked hard for her status. Also, Jonah sort of disappeared into the background of my first outline, never really proving to be a serious threat, and essentially avoiding trouble at all costs. Lee immediately easily overcame him for the sheer fact that he's totally fine with leaving his girlfriend in a hostage situation. I knew this needed some serious work. Thus, I flipped the genders and Jonah became Tess: still mean and manipulative, but no longer a lover of Charlotte's. Now, she sort of serves as the dark version of what Charlotte could potentially become in her lust for production power. So, with the protagonist and love interest in place, the question became, who are the true villains of the story?

Chapter 4: Who's Bad?

My writing experiences have taught me that with any new and exciting idea, comes a tangled web of problems to sort through along with it. Through workshop, my mighty and noble professor Richard Lewis had the thought that Tess, the producer of *Shut Up and Sing* should be happy when the hostage situation takes place in the middle of her show. She could treat the fiasco as a ratings gold mine, and *want* the show's cameras to keep rolling inside the arena. I absolutely loved this development, and it made Tess's character have what I thought was the necessary amount of depth without going overboard and spending too much time with her. But in order to show her pulling the strings from outside the arena, she required multiple cutaways in the script. This was useful in helping the indoor scenes feel less claustrophobic, but the real problem was too many bad guys crowding the storytelling and distracting from Lee's quest.

The villains in the script that serve as true obstacles for Lee are undoubtedly Eileen and Keith, harshly rejected contestants who take their vengeance by taking over the show at gun point. Initially, I had conceived that Eileen and Keith were separate contestants, strangers with only one thing they shared in common: they were both rejected by the judges. Post-humiliation, Eileen and Keith come up with a plan together to steal handguns from security guards and take over the show. However, when I got to the actual script-writing process, this plot took too long to develop while still juggling the storyline of Lee

breaking into the arena and seeking out Charlotte. Therefore, I decided that Eileen and Keith could be lovers. I hypothesized that Keith doesn't even have to be a contestant, he could just be angry that the love of his life got bashed so viciously in public. Even cutting corners in this regard still didn't save quite enough page space and accelerate the first act events quickly enough for the proper plot points to fall into place. Eileen and Keith coming up with the revenge plot on the fly was a stretch, so I decided that the hostage situation would better serve as a preconceived back up plan if Eileen were to be rejected by the judges. To strengthen its plausibility, I mapped out Eileen's backstory as a contestant who has been repeatedly rejected on the show year after year. This final rejection is the last straw, and she just can't take it anymore.

I struggled for a while (through the entire first draft, in fact) with a proper location to set the events that transpire in the story. I had somehow convinced myself that smaller budget movies would appeal to readers more than going too over-the-top. So, I had Eileen and Keith take over a room full of contestants and crew rather than the entire arena. In a story where I was intimidated to juggle so many characters, I wanted to narrow the setting down to a confined place with a limited number of people. However, this tight setting only presented a number of problems that unfortunately plagued by first draft of the script. This progression regarding the setting in particular traces my evolution from first draft where, I functioned as a timid, inexperienced action comedy writer, to embracing the genre more a little more comfortably by the time of my revision. Placing the

action in a confined space certainly limited the world of the story, but at the same time it naturally gave the script a more claustrophobic feel, which led me to an additional problem: interesting set pieces that kept the reader engaged. In order to pull this off, I had Lee start off on the outside of the arena at the act one break, and subsequently act two began with him breaking his way back inside. By the midpoint, I had Lee captured along with the other hostages. In my first draft, instead of keeping Lee in the room with nowhere to go, I had him leave the hostage area not once, but *twice*. Not only did this stretch plausibility extremely thin, but it also led to a bloated first draft with Lee spending too much time on small missions during the course of act two.

Once Eileen and Keith take over the room, they essentially run the show, having performances from the contestants and captives. Only, *Shut Up and Sing*, the singing competition show, doesn't take place in a tiny room, it takes place *on stage*. The solution to the problem was staring me in the face, but first draft deadlines and stubbornness led me to continue down a treacherous path. Thus, by the time the revision process came around, I knew my first step: the story must take place on stage, with an audience of spectators – Eileen and Keith needed to take over the actual show. I made this adjustment, but was aware, even in the first, smaller-scale draft, that managing a room full of hostages was no easy task for two angry villains. Though they were absent in the first draft, I decided that fellow crazed rejected contestants would aid Eileen and Keith, and that Eileen would equip these menaces with weapons as well to assist with

crowd control. This was especially necessary with an arena containing not only contestant and crew hostages, but a packed audience trapped in their seats as well. The setting, though now limited to one location, was immediately more exciting and refreshing.

Borrowing from my *X-Factor* experience, I decided that *Shut Up and Sing* needed one particularly cruel judge like Simon Cowell. This became Italian music mogul producer and metrosexual Aldo Vega. However, Aldo serves as another case where a character's background information should perhaps remain off the page. I had this notion that Aldo could be a villain who, by the end of the story, redeems himself. I wanted him to be a bitter producer who's resorted to reality TV where he spends his time harassing contestants whereas long ago he nurtured some of the most beloved artists of our generation. This gave Lee another goal among many already present in the script: to help Aldo find his way and get in touch with the good person deep down that he used to be. I still enjoy this storyline, but by the time I got to the revision process, I decided that it detracts from the overall central plot. First of all, in the rough draft of my script, Aldo is the reason that Lee is forced to leave the hostage room for the second time. As mentioned previously, that idea alone was already problematic, since Lee has already left and returned to the room prior to this incident. This means that Aldo, in the original draft, had escaped the building and was safe outside in his trailer while the hostage situation took place in a room inside. I had trouble making it plausible that Aldo would even be in the vicinity of this arena once he

managed to make it out alive. Also, by having Eileen strongly desire a presence with Aldo (which is the reason Lee is sent from the arena by Eileen: to capture Aldo and bring him to her) it centralized him more as another villain in the screenplay that ultimately proved unnecessary. So, in my revision, since the hostage situation now takes place on the competition stage itself, Aldo is trapped along with everyone else. His presence operates as more of a background character with a few humorous scenes of humiliation retaliation from Eileen, but he never really has his own thread or arc. One villain was removed from the script, thus shifting the focus on Eileen, Keith, and Tess the cruel producer.

Now, that I had a clearer target on who my villains were in the script, I needed to figure out the details of their motivation in order to have them operate properly on the page. Originally, Eileen takes over so that she can get the show's five million dollar cash prize as well as a record contract. Halfway through my rough draft, I merged the two into a five million dollar record contract. My thinking was that Eileen would be foolish enough to actually believe that she'd get a record contract after traumatizing a room full of people during an armed robbery. While that idea in itself is amusing, it didn't hold strong enough or warrant its presence in the script simply for the sake of a punch line. Thus, the theme of my essay comes to the forefront yet again: simplification. Eileen, in the present draft, just merely wants to get her time in the spotlight. She takes over to be what she thinks she already is: a star. Having been a contestant on *Shut Up and Sing* nine consecutive years, she was never able to even finish a song, always cut off and

kicked out before the last note. Thus, her only demand is fame for the night, and to, at last, perform on her own terms.

I felt as though Tess's character in the first draft worked well for the most part. She was manipulative, and by helping ensure that the chaos inside the arena kept going, she was a definite obstacle for Lee. Having taken a break from this script and writing another feature for a while, it was difficult for me to come back to this story. As is often the case, I had lost touch with the initial excitement that drove me to get this narrative on the page as soon as possible. I believed that in order to find the motivation to give *Shut Up and Sing* the draft it deserved, I would need something new and exciting to work toward near the climax of my script. While *Shut Up and Sing* was my first attempt at writing an action script, the screenplay that followed it was my first attempt at including a story with various twists and turns. I feel as though that writing experience strengthened my storytelling ability, and allowed me to come back to *Shut Up and Sing* with a fresh outlook and altered perspective. Thus, I decided that Tess would be an even bigger mastermind in my new draft. Sure, she wants to keep the cameras rolling inside, and definitely believes that the hostage crisis, if handled correctly, could be a massive ratings victory. However, I wanted to take this to another level. What if Tess had orchestrated the whole hostage situation from the get-go? Everyone would be in on it: the contestants, the crew, the audience, even the police; everyone *but* Lee. *Truman Show* is one of my favorite movies, and I broke the structure of it in order to help me hide the ball regarding the fakeness of the

whole affair. The idea itself stems back to my original real-life experience, seeing little “x’s” next to contestants names on their information sheets. The producers know exactly what kind of show they’re putting on. Tess is no different. However, there’s a curveball that no one expected: Lee.

What started as a simple idea that Lee would screw up Eileen’s performance, escalated exponentially by my latest draft. By making Eileen in on the joke, it meant that Lee had to be a problem for her in a number of ways for her to truly be an antagonist. Tess’s plan is to have a ratings boost for the show after three years of lost interest from viewers. Thus, she organizes this huge spectacle that she knows will get them mass amounts of attention. However, Lee, hearing that Charlotte is in town, is persistent and steadfast in his quest to do anything and everything to get inside the building, even though he’s not a contestant or audience member. And *because* he’s not a contestant or part of the audience, it means that he wasn’t in on the whole joke.

Tess sees the silver lining in Lee’s unwelcome arrival through his love connection with Charlotte. To her, they serve as the perfect candidates for heroes of her little story, the Jim and Pam of *The Office* that everyone will get behind and root for. The media attention shifts from crazy Eileen’s takeover, to lovebirds trapped in a cage. This doesn’t sit well with Eileen, which drives her to start taking liberties with the plan Tess had originally laid out. But what happens to the stakes once the story shifts to a ruse? No one’s really in danger if the guns

are toys. Therefore, I decided that there was no better place for a twist, than right on top of another twist. Eileen, scorned now, not by the judges, but by Tess, who promised her a night where she might finally shine, came with a backup plan: real guns for her and Keith. At the low point of the story, Eileen pulls the rug out from under the mastermind Tess, by actually taking over the show. Initially, the idea of a contestant taking over a reality show felt too disconnected from the reality television world. Really, it felt like two movies mashed together. So, part of the reason I decided to have Eileen fake taking over, then *really* take over, is because I wanted to explore this idea that even when every step of a show is planned out, how might the puppet-masters react to losing all sense of control? These hostages and audience members all signed up to pretend to be scared and get on TV. Well, thanks to a menacing Eileen and Keith, they stop pretending and their screams get a little more real. What better place for an escalation of tension than as a precursor to a climax?

Chapter 5: Simply Sidekicks

Although it can certainly be argued that they serve no significant purpose to the overall, bigger picture plot mechanics of the script, I write this chapter as a testament to the most successful first draft portions that actually carried over into my thesis script. I've come to notice that in every screenplay I've written, the comedic supporting characters directly linked to my protagonists are always the easiest and most fun to write. This certainly was no different for Martin, the lovable, drugged-out goofball best friend of Lee. In fact, I enjoyed writing Martin so much that he almost took over the story.

In my original outline/first draft, Martin not only had more page time in the first act than Lee, but he was significantly more active in the pursuit of his goal. His goal is to snap provocative photos of the shows pop-star celebrity judge: Lyss Hartman and sell them off to the highest bidder. Originally, in outline form, I had conceived Martin as Lee's best friend. However, by the time I got to the actual pages, I decided that since Lee and Charlotte already knew each other, having another character in this circle might give off too much of a "small world" feeling and play too far-fetched. I thought it might be interesting for Lee to come away from this traumatic experience with a new best friend that he just met that morning. However, I learned from my first draft that introducing an entirely new character takes time and page space, and by the final draft, Martin returned to being Lee's best friend again. In fact, Martin came to retain most of his actions from the outline to the final draft. His pursuit of Lyss Hartman was a solid enough

thread on its own that structure changes never truly affected it. Throughout every draft, Martin always cheated his way into the arena and, though he meant well, he consistently served as a hindrance for Lee. The addition of a prologue where Lee scars Charlotte for life in the gym showers left room for me to develop Martin and Lee's friendship as well. I decided that this moment would spur Martin's obsession with capturing provocative situations on film, and he would be responsible for Charlotte's embarrassment becoming an Internet hit. This leads to Lee having a falling out with Martin, who sold his soul for Internet fame with no regard for Lee's love life. Thus, there's a sort of train of redemption at work in the script. Martin is sorry and wants his best friend Lee back while Lee is sorry and wants his ex-girlfriend Charlotte back. And all of this stems from one fateful night in high school.

I sought to make Martin really likable and fun, so that at the low point I could have a moment that fakes his death, only to bring him back alive and well. Lee later discovering that Martin had survived was also a cheap way for me to spur Lee into forgiving Martin/becoming Martin's friend. Supporting characters such as Martin seem to come so naturally to me, that I often contemplate writing a first draft of a script with my protagonist in disguise as the supporting character. Then, through revision, I'd bring the sidekick to the forefront as the lead. I've never been brave enough to test of this experiment yet.

A character I dreaded writing but turned out to be one of the most enjoyable to create was police officer Blaylock, a man on the outside of the

madness in the arena. Originally, I conceived Blaylock as a sort of Michael Jai White kind of guy, tough, intimidating, confident. Also, he began as a police captain in my first draft. Hostage negotiations have been depicted in various films so many times, that I dreaded doing one of my own. How could I possibly spin it creatively? Ultimately, I found that the answer was that I could not, and that the one scene I had of Blaylock communicating with Eileen on the inside was straightforward and derivative. Luckily, when the storyline shifted to a charade created by the producers, it gave me a chance to alter the hostage negotiating as well. I decided that I would make Blaylock Lee's oddball kindred spirit on the outside – instead of a police captain, he'd be a down and out deputy who no one on the force believes is worth anything. This gave him room to prove himself by the end of the script and become a hero along with Lee. Also, paralleling Lee further, I decided that Blaylock, too, would be unaware of this whole sham taking place, a clueless casualty. Therefore, Blaylock would show up trying to prove himself, while the rest of the police would just want him to go home so that they can get paid to sit around and look busy. No hostage negotiations were necessary since the whole event is a guise. They were needed more in the script when Eileen was actually demanding money. All she wants here is some airtime to sing for all of America. Like Lee, Blaylock serves as an unwelcome addition to the party who only complicates things for Tess. Blaylock notices that something is amiss: his coworkers are too calm, the producers are too happy. Slowly, I wanted Blaylock to unravel Tess's plot on the outside and bring her to justice.

Chapter 6: Payoffs

By writing a script for the first time that included so many characters, I encountered a pretty significant problem: paying off every plotline in a satisfying way. First off, I knew that I wanted Eileen and Keith to be arrested. Though, I still feel that this is perhaps a cliché', I was unsure how else to end their plot, and knew without a doubt that I didn't want them to die. I thought it'd perhaps be interesting if Keith first laid eyes on Eileen while he was locked up in prison, and that at the end of the story he was almost excited to be able to bring her to his home turf. Keith is steadfast in his devotion to Eileen, and by the end of the story love is in the air, and she finally shows him a little affection.

Martin was simple to wrap up as well. He seeks out Lyss Hartman to take advantage of her for the media, but by the end of the story they find out that they're the perfect kind of crazy for each other, winding up together. I knew that Blaylock's story should end with him redeeming himself in a heroic fashion. Ever since I was a kid, my favorite kind of action movies or superhero stories involved multiple protagonists each facing off against a separate villain. I was excited to finally have the chance to have my own showdown at the climax. I wrote it to where Lee and Keith face off, Eileen and Charlotte go head to head, and Blaylock takes down Tess.

These payoffs naturally seemed to work themselves out in the plot, but there were some smaller threads I struggled to make work. I got carried away with a plethora of outlandish contestants, some of whom needed to be cut for the

final draft to save page space while also saving me the headache of wrapping up their story nicely. I was happy with Charlotte's backstory as a talented singer with crippling stage fright. In my current draft, it still feels a little rushed and forced, but Lee convinces Charlotte that the only way to distract Eileen and really beat her, is by stealing the limelight away from her. So, Charlotte mirroring the opening scene, sings her heart out and Eileen is, at last, defeated.

However, the biggest struggle of them all, as is in any romantic comedy, is selling the idea that Lee has earned the heart of Charlotte. While coming up with a strong motivation for Charlotte to hate Lee's guts lends well to the difficulty of Lee's mission throughout the script, it makes it that much harder to sell that Lee has truly succeeded obtaining his forgiveness. Originally, I had an epilogue that showed Lee and Charlotte going on to make their own reality show together that actually cultivated the talents of young singers. This ended up not only being cheesy, but struck an odd chord since Lee and Charlotte seem suddenly so friendly. From personal experience, I know that reuniting with an ex often comes with its fair share of bickering, and I wanted Lee and Charlotte to butt heads throughout the entire script while overcoming obstacles. By the end, I wanted them to agree that maybe they could be friends. From personal experience, I learned that ex-couples bicker because, like seeing any other friend you haven't seen in a while, people pick up right where they last left off. For ex-couples, that means bickering and having sex. I can't speak on behalf of women, but it's incredibly difficult for a guy not to picture his ex-girlfriend naked when he sees

her for the first time in a while. So, I wanted to have a coda where Lee and Charlotte, relieved that they're alive, tear each other's clothes off. I thought Charlotte actually being given a record deal might play odd and too fantastical, so I wanted the offer to be on the table but for her to put it aside for now. Will Lee and Charlotte wind up together? Will Charlotte become a famous singer? Who knows? For now, they just want to let out all of their stress and celebrate life by making sweet, sweet love.

Chapter 7: From Green to Burnt Orange

When I applied to grad school, I was at a strange time in my life. My friends were getting the post-grad jobs in Louisiana that almost certainly guaranteed that they'd be there for the rest of their life. Meanwhile, the film industry that I so desperately wanted to be a part of happened to be booming in my resident town of Baton Rouge. I took multiple jobs as a production assistant in Baton Rouge, and part of my experience was picking up Los Angeles crew members from the airport and welcoming them to the other, much more humid "LA." When I mentioned my envy of where they lived, every single one of them with no exception said that I'd be crazy to leave Louisiana when the industry is booming so much. These words haunted and stuck with me. Having been a creative writing major during my undergraduate career and having written a whopping one screenplay, I was foolishly convinced that I could throw together a screenplay anytime. But that year I worked as a production assistant, I wrote little to nothing, with all my hours spent on set. The answer was simple. I knew I wanted to write and exercise my creative muscles, and everything in Baton Rouge was doing nothing to further my chances of telling stories. I genuinely look back at getting the acceptance letter from the University of Texas as one of the proudest moments in my life.

Since high school I had big dreams that I could never truly afford. I applied to NYU and got accepted, but passed and stayed in-state for free tuition that Louisiana offered through their TOPS program. The in-state tuition and

scholarship offered for UT's MFA made a world of difference, and I couldn't possibly be more grateful for the opportunity to take a huge leap in my life and finally leave home. Though, I had learned basic screenplay structure as an undergrad, I was stubborn in adhering to its firm rules. I was convinced that my favorite writers and directors wouldn't dare follow such a rigid structure. Boy, was I completely wrong. Breaking down the scripts and films of my favorite artists taught me that the best writers follow the rules without the audience even knowing that they're being manipulated by an age-old device in storytelling. I learned this lesson midway through my first screenplay in the program, and spent a revision on the draft trying to shape it into the three-act structure that would render it readable.

With my second feature script, which happened to be *Shut Up and Sing*, I overcompensated for my previous mistake, vowing that I'd write a Hollywood movie. The first draft of that script emerged with all plot and no heart, and I knew it needed serious work. By my final semester when I was writing my third feature, I had come to acquire a multitude of skills, balancing storytelling from the heart with a proper mixture of the necessary Hollywood structure. I am most proud of that script, and it serves to exemplify my progress in UT's program from a novice to a more competent writer with much firmer a grasp of the medium.

Being a teacher's assistant was a profound, invaluable experience. I was faced with twelve versions of my former stubborn self, and I was forced to serve as a living testament to the power of following structure/tried and true plot

mechanics. I would tell them: “No, I was like you, too!” I’ve come to believe that these rules exist for a multitude of reasons. Trained script readers are programmed to look for proper act breaks and turning points. Even if the writing is spectacular and the prose is captivating, if these elements are missing it could prove fatal to a script’s progression from the reader’s desk to the producer’s desk. Teaching was also immensely useful for the sheer purposes of always keeping in mind the basics. I certainly could not correct my students mistakes if I, too, was still guilty of the same flaws. Thus, in order to avoid hypocrisy, I was constantly reminded to follow the rules both with regards to basic script structure as well as storytelling.

Never would I have dreamt in a million years upon entering the program, that I would fall in love with television writing, but now, having completed the program, I not only love teleplay writing but wish to have a career in television. Obviously, I owe all credit to the program’s curriculum. By the time I began television class, I was a firm believer in structure and giving myself limitations to live by, and television, essentially a shorter version of features, had the same effect but in even tighter chapters. My love of television writing was emboldened by my internship with local writer, director, showrunner Rob Thomas, a remarkable opportunity I would have never been granted without the connections provided by the university. I was able to witness the birth of a pilot idea, see it through outline and multiple script drafts, and then witness negotiations with studio and networks (USA, CW, WB, HBO) on how best to structure the script so

that it might get picked up. Brainstorming ideas for overall plot mechanics as well as pitching trims and story beats allowed for me to experience the feel of a real writers room firsthand. Rob genuinely valued our opinions and ideas, and often would utilize our suggestions in the script.

Being trained to be part of a team and collaborate on ideas excites me for the chance of being able to one day be in a writers' room here in Los Angeles. Workshop and revision will never end for me, and I am grateful for having been trained to keep these routines steady during the pursuit of my writing career. I've met people and made connections that will always be a part of my life. People say that a lot of this industry has to do with luck. Well, I feel as though being a part of UT's MFA screenwriting program with brilliant teachers and classmates who inspired me to write better was beyond fortunate. I'm optimistic that such luck will continue, and thanks to this life-changing experience I can say with confidence that I look forward to utilizing the tools I've acquired to meet the needs of any and all possible writing opportunities that might come my way.

Appendix A: Initial Outline

Atlanta, GA.

1. EXT. INDOOR ARENA - MORNING

Opening image: Cameras equipped, a boisterous CROWD waits near rope-barricaded and security-guarded trailers set up outside the arena. SCREAMS erupt as a trailer door opens. From inside emerges...

LEE (23), jeans and a raggedy t-shirt ... far from famous. The crowd's sigh of disappointment practically knocks Lee off his feet. "What? I had to pee," he explains to them.

Lee returns to his fellow fifty-plus workers scattered outside the building. He gets scolded by another know-it-all crew member for abusing the trailer of the show's star judge LYSS PHILLIPS, tween sensation.

Lee complains about the fact that they've been waiting outside for over an hour now. Finally, the show runner JONAH (35), shows his face and immediately fires everyone sitting down. "I need people who are ready to work." Security at the door is intense, checking everyone's IDs closely. Lee is given a crew shirt that's way too tiny.

2. INT. INDOOR ARENA HALLWAY – MORNING

Jonah escorts Lee and the other surviving crewmembers through the arena for an unenthusiastic tour involving pop quizzes that result in more terminations.

3. INT. STAGE AREA – CONTINUED

During the tour, Lee spots CHARLOTTE (23), cute, short blonde hair, much more professional than Lee, escorting contestants. He begins to follow after her when...

Jonah snaps Lee out of it and hits him with a pop quiz question to see if he's been listening. Lee manages to survive, answering the question correctly. Jonah, flexing his dick muscles, ends up making Lee sing a song onstage in front of everyone and Lee gets way too into a Backstreet Boys jam.

4. INT. BACKSTAGE - MORNING

Lee, who runs sound for shitty cover bands, is excited when Jonah informs him that he'll work the audio booth. However, he's disappointed to find that his job is basically just to hit play and stop all day long. Jonah takes pleasure in sticking Lee in one spot for the rest of the day.

Lee spots Charlotte again and tries to get to her, but is impeded as the waves of tweens and bored parents filing in to serve as the show's audience.

5. INT. ARENA BLEACHERS - MORNING

Lee is surprised to find his best friend MARTIN (24), smoking weed with a janitor underneath the unused bleachers located behind the stage.

Martin reveals to Lee his tedious planning in signing up for the competition as a contestant all in the hopes of getting provocative pictures of tween star Lyss Phillips to sell off to the highest bidder.

He holds up a set of keys he snagged from the janitor granting him all access to snap some indecent shots of Lyss. Lee points out the fact that Martin will actually have to sing. "Duh." Martin's backup plan is to win the whole competition. "Have you ever heard me sing Seal at karaoke?" Martin probes a hesitant Lee about his reasons for interning on the show: "You hate reality TV, dude."

When Martin catches Lee staring at Charlotte he calls him out, revealing *Lee's true intentions*: to get back with Charlotte, Lee's high-school ex. They spot Charlotte with Jonah... being a little too friendly. Then they hear the crowd roar:

6. INT. BACKSTAGE - MORNING

The judges begin entering individually. RITA BURKE (63), soul singer legend. Followed by LYSS PHILLIPS (22), tween sensation. And finally music mogul producer ALDO VEGA (48), the tough, grumpy judge.

Lee is called back to his station to work by Jonah.

7. INT. STAGE AREA - MORNING

Reject montage: an onslaught of bad performances/judge responses:

Such as... Rap group: Deja Boo. A guy who throws confetti from his pockets and is escorted offstage when he attempts to pop fireworks. A person who tries their hand

at singing a Lyss Phillips song which leads to Lyss Phillips ranting about herself. And a montage of questions from the judges like "What would you do with the five million dollar cash prize?" Also, Aldo Vega provokes the raucous crowd by yelling "Should he [the contestant] shut up or should he/she sing?!"

Amongst the group of terrible performances is EILEEN (28). Lee accidentally starts her song a few seconds late and throws her off. (This fact will come back to haunt him later.) Also, there's a fly buzzing around her face that she spastically swats at during her performance. "Have you seen my YouTube?!" she asks the judges after a harsh rejection.

Lee and Martin watch KEITH (31), perform onstage. His own original rap/rock song. It's abysmal. He gets excessively berated by the judges and doesn't handle it well. He takes a stab at Lyss Phillips: "At least I don't need auto tune to sing, bitch."

8. INT. BACKSTAGE - MORNING

Lee watches as a fuming Keith is interviewed afterwards and he explains that this is his second year in a row auditioning. "Aldo asked me to come back this year just so he could humiliate me again."

Martin approaches Lee. He's on deck to sing.

Martin: "If you're here to see Charlotte then why don't you go find her?"

Lee: "Because if I wind up fired, they'll toss me out and I'm screwed."

Martin: "Well, you should have just signed up to be a contestant like me. Then you'd see her."

Lee: "Wait, you know where she's at? Tell me!"

Martin: "No way, dude. I'm not supporting this shit."

9. INT. BLEACHERS - MORNING.

Eileen, having witnessed Keith's similar failure onstage, beckons Keith from the shadows of the unoccupied bleachers behind the stage. She hits him with a proposition: to get the five million dollar prize and record deal from Aldo Vega... forcefully.

She claims to be experienced, having robbed a few convenient stores. But finally truthfully admits that the worst "heists" she's done are more along the lines of clepto than criminal. Keith refuses her offer.

10. INT. SIDE STAGE - MORNING

As he exits, Keith catches part of Lee and Martin's conversation nearby. Regarding Charlotte, Lee explains to Martin his unrelenting resolve, claiming that he doesn't want to spend the rest of his life thinking he let her go without giving it everything he's got. Keith ponders Lee's words...

Before Martin is able to perform, the judges take a bathroom break and Martin seizes the opportunity to try to land a photo of Lyss. Before he rushes off he informs Lee that Charlotte is on the fourth floor.

Lee thanks Martin but has to figure out a way to distract Jonah so he can leave his post. He unplugs and plugs in a fellow PA's walkie causing it to key making noisy chatter on everyone's walkies. Jonah HATES keying and storms off trying to find the culprit. He tells Lee to stay put. But as soon as Jonah is out of sight, Lee takes off for the fourth floor.

11. INT. CONTESTANT HOLDING ROOM - MORNING

Lee finds Charlotte, who is not pleased to see him. "Did you see Martin here?" Cut to:

12. INT. HALLWAY - MORNING

Meanwhile Martin tries to get bathroom photos of Lyss Phillips. Martin spots a guard outside the judges' bathrooms. He approaches with a janitor cart playing nonchalant and trying to roll his way into the bathroom, but the bathroom security guard stops him, questioning his lack of janitorial attire. "This is the judges' private bathroom."

13. INT. LOADING DOCK - MORNING

Meanwhile Eileen goes with her plan alone, seeking to steal a gun off of a security guard. She awkwardly seduces him before bashing him over the head but she fails to knock him out. Eileen wrestles with the guard who calls on his walkie for help.

13. INT. HALLWAY - MORNING

The bathroom security guard gets the distress call and takes off. Martin is thrilled with his luck and rushes inside the bathroom.

14. INT. BATHROOM – MORNING

Martin looks for a spot to set up the camera on his phone. Martin sets up his phone's camera attached to the ceiling and flees from the bathroom just as Lyss enters.

15. INT. LOADING DOCK - MORNING

The bathroom security guard shows up to help the one fighting Eileen. She seems all but screwed, just as Keith shows up to save the day, knocking out the other guard. "I'm in." He tells her.

16. INT. CONTESTANT HOLDING AREA - MORNING

When an already stressed Charlotte gets word that Martin is MIA and needs to be prepped to go onstage, Lee tries to win her favor by giving him a call.

17. INT. BATHROOM – MORNING

As Lyss steps into a stall, the phone taped to the ceiling starts vibrating and Lyssa spots it. She is disturbed.

18. INT. CONTESTANT HOLDING AREA - MORNING

Lee gets no response from the phone call. When Lee starts asking Charlotte about the nature of her relationship with Jonah, ("What do you mean you guys hook up? Is this some new hip LA definition of hook up?") Lee: "Oh, big whoop." Charlotte: "No one says big whoop anymore.")

Charlotte gets sufficiently annoyed, telling him that she's busy. Lee calmly informs her that he's just looking to catch up. Sighing, Charlotte tells Lee that they can talk later just as Lee hears that the walkie-talkies have stopped keying, meaning Jonah's on his way back to the booth! If he gets fired, Lee can kiss that QT with his cutie goodbye. He flees downstairs.

19. INT. HALLWAY - MORNING

Martin sees an upset Lyss storm from the bathroom and walks off with her bodyguards. He slips into the bathroom after her.

20. INT. BATHROOM – CONTINUED

Martin finds his phone in the toilet. Mission failed.

21. INT. BACKSTAGE – MORNING

From a distance, Lee sees Jonah approaching his booth. There's no way he'll make it back in time... Just as Jonah spots Lyss ranting and raving and follows after her to calm her down. He slides into his chair safely.

Martin approaches and tells Lee of his failed attempt. Lee: "Why would you want a bathroom picture of her anyway?" Martin: "Dude, a picture of Jessica Simpson taking a dump while eating a burrito sold for \$40,000 dollars."

Martin proceeds to snatch a flower from a nearby bouquet and tells Lee "Give me your phone." Lee: "What? Why?" They're calling for Martin onstage. Martin: "Just do it!" Lee obliges and Martin equipped with the phone and flower says: "Time for plan B" before stepping onstage.

22. INT. ELEVATOR - MORNING

Elevator scene where Keith and Eileen practice poses with their newly acquired guns.

23. CONTESTANT HOLDING AREA – MORNING

They take over the contestant holding room and order everyone to get on the ground, including Charlotte. They order a cameraman to hook up feed to the stage's screen for all of the audience and the judges to see.

24. STAGE AREA - MORNING

Onstage, Martin proceeds to flirt with Lyss giving her the flower and "accidentally" spilling her water all over her chest. When he tries to sneak a photo of the soaking wet Lyss with Lee's phone, the flash is on and he's spotted. A security guard snatches the phone away from him and is escorting him away when:

The stage's huge screen displays a gun-wielding Keith and Eileen with their hostages. *Inciting Incident:* Keith: "I want another audition!" I mean, I want 5 million dollars and a record deal. How's it feel to be in the hot seat? Huh? The pressure's on you now, Aldo."

The building is quickly evacuated.

25. EXT. ARENA - MORNING

CROWDS of frantic people outside. Lee approaches Jonah about helping Charlotte but Jonah seems to be only worried about himself and the bad publicity the stunt will be sure to bring.

Lee finds Martin and tells him that he needs the keys to the building because he's going back in for Charlotte. Martin thinks he's nuts but finally agrees. *Act One Break:* Lee and Martin make their way back toward the building.

ACT TWO

26. EXT. ARENA – LOADING DOCK - MORNING

Sneaking around the back of the building, Lee and Martin, manage to get back inside using the keys that Martin stole from the janitor.

27. INT. ARENA – LOADING DOCK - MORNING

Inside, they find the tied up security guards from whom Keith and Eileen stole handguns. The guards tell them that they should keep away from the lunatics and let the Police handle it, but Lee tells them: "I'm not trying to get in, I just want to sneak someone out, that's all." The guards warn them that "that chick [Eileen] is nuts! She bit me, man!"

28. INT. CONTESTANT HOLDING ROOM - MORNING

Keith and Eileen collect money, jewelry, and all other belongings from the hostages. One mouths off to Eileen. "It's not fair that I didn't get to perform." He refuses to give her his watch and she takes it from him and smashes it.

29. INT. STAIRWELL - MORNING

Lee and Martin watch Eileen through a tiny window on a door leading into the room. Martin starts to try to find the key to the room, but Lee tells him not to, because it'll make too much noise. They need a distraction.

30. INT. FOURTH FLOOR HALLWAY - MORNING

Having successfully used his walkie as a way of distracting Jonah, Lee decides to use it again. Lee finds a second walkie, switches the knobs on both his and the new one to a specific channel.

They find the vent that leads into the room. To reach the vent, Martin suggests that Lee stand on his back. They try it for a second and realize it's a terrible idea. Lee uses a chair instead and begins unscrewing the vent cover with a penny. He then slides the walkie down the air vent that leads into the hostage holding room.

31. INT. ARENA – CONTESTANT HOLDING AREA – CONTINUED

Keith and Eileen hear the walkie slide into the vent followed by strange animal noises and spooky moans echoing from the vent.

32. INT. ARENA – STAIRWELL – CONTINUED

Martin, making noises into the other walkie, watches Keith and Eileen through the door's small window, while Lee tries to find the right key to open the door.

33. INT. ARENA – CONTESTANT HOLDING AREA – CONTINUED

Keith traces the noise to the ceiling and gets a chair so that he can get it down. He's still not tall enough. He goofily gets on Eileen's shoulders struggling to pry open the vent and find the source.

34. INT. ARENA – STAIRWELL - CONTINUED

The clock is ticking while Keith and Eileen are closer to finding the source of the disruption and Martin is running out of voices and noises to make over the walkie. Lee finally unlocks the door and slowly opens it...

From the doorway, Lee and Martin beckon for Charlotte to join them while Keith and Eileen are still distracted. Charlotte sneaks over to them just as Martin's cellphone rings in his pocket (Apparently, it dried off from its adventure in the toilet and is functioning again at a most inconvenient time.) Keith and Eileen look over and discover the escapees, holding them at gunpoint before they can flee. Their escape plan is officially foiled.

35. INT. ARENA – CONTESTANT HOLDING ROOM - DAY

Keith and Eileen get Lee and Martin to empty their pockets: Adderall, a few joints, a couple of jolly ranchers. While gloating over his capture of the attempted escapees, Keith pops one of the jolly ranchers into his mouth, though Martin adamantly protests that he shouldn't.

Keith reveals to Lee that his little speech (when Lee spoke to Martin about his dedication to winning Charlotte back) inspired him to join Eileen in taking hostages in the first place.

Charlotte is upset with Lee, wondering what he could have possibly said to bring about this situation.

36. INT. ARENA – CONTESTANT HOLDING ROOM - LATER

Keith begins duct-taping up the air vents to prevent any more interruptions.

Sitting off to the side, Lee and Charlotte argue while Martin frantically tries to get their attention, keeping a nervous eye on Keith who seems to be growing more sweaty and pale with each passing minute.

Charlotte's upset with Lee for getting them in this mess. Lee tells her that she's just as much to blame and that it's no coincidence that *Shut Up and Sing* decided to come to Atlanta this year. There's a reason he saw so many flyers in Nelson, Georgia, (Lee and Charlotte's hometown). He tells Charlotte that he thought the flyers were a sign, beckoning for him to come to find her, as if it were his destiny. He realizes now that they were evidence of Charlotte's influence on Jonah, the show's producer.

He accuses her of telling Jonah all about her derelict hometown from which a barrage of freak show contestants would come running in the hopes of making it big. They wanted to find the best people to humiliate. Lee: "I'm sure it's the reason you're hooking up with him. You're a Hollywood girl now. You've gotta do what it takes to make it." Charlotte: "Oh, screw you, asshole." Charlotte moves away from Lee.

Martin, finally able to get Lee's attention, tells him that it was no ordinary Jolly Rancher that Keith chomped on. It's laced with one hit of acid. Martin explains that he was planning on slipping it to Lyss Phillips so that he could get golden photos her tripping balls. Lee stares at a wobbly Keith, nervously.

37. EXT. INDOOR ARENA – DAY

Police have gathered. CAPTAIN BLAYLOCK (54) arrives on the scene. Your typical "What's the situation" scene. Jonah provides them with Keith and Eileen's information, including their cell numbers. They point out that Eileen seems to wear the pants while Keith is sort of a goof. CUT TO:

38. INT. ARENA – CONTESTANT HOLDING ROOM - DAY

After taping up the last vent, Keith expresses that he's lightheaded. Lee, trying to get Keith away from everyone before the trip kicks in, tells him: "I could show you where the craft service area is if you want?" Charlotte says: "Do you even know where it's at?" They bicker.

Keith, annoyed, tells them both to come with him and for Eileen to keep watch. Eileen tells them to be back in fifteen minutes. She points the gun at Martin. "Or else." "GULP!" says Martin. He doesn't really say that.

39. INT. ARENA – HALLWAY - DAY

Keith leads Lee and Charlotte down the hallway. Charlotte notices that Keith is scratching himself and progressively acting more and more strangely. Lee whispers to her explaining the acid jolly rancher. Charlotte: "You gave acid to a guy with a gun?!" Lee: "We didn't *give* it to him."

Lee tells her he was trying to get him out of the room to protect her. Charlotte tells him to stop looking out for her because it only ends up making things worse. Charlotte: "Maybe he'll just pass out or something." Lee: "Pass out? Have you ever dropped acid? He'll be awake for two days."

40. INT. CRAFT SERVICES ROOM - DAY

Lee and Charlotte load up carts of food. Keith is no longer even pointing his gun at them, he's just fascinated by life (and a little scared.) Suddenly, he takes off sprinting from the room.

Lee: "Shit, we've gotta go after him." Charlotte: "What? Let's just leave that psycho." Lee: "Did you see the way that lady pointed the gun at Martin? We have to be back in fifteen (checks watch) actually ten minutes now. All three of us."

41. EXT. INDOOR ARENA – DAY

Captain Blaylock pumps himself up before giving Eileen a call.

42. INT. ARENA – CONTESTANT HOLDING ROOM - DAY

Eileen speaks to the Captain Blaylock on a cellphone. She wants Aldo to personally deliver the five-million dollars to her in a briefcase. "Ma'am, I'm not sure if five million dollars can fit in a briefcase." Eileen: "Whatever, I just want the money from HIM." Captain Blaylock asks if Eileen can guarantee that Mr. Vega will not be

harmed. She says that he'll be just fine, but in a very sarcastic and unconvincing way. The police don't buy it.

After the conversation, Martin and some other contestants complain to Eileen about how hot the room is getting since the vents are blocked up. She ignores them, drawing with a sharpee on the face of a life-size standee of Lyss Phillips.

43. INT. ARENA – STAGE AREA - DAY

Lee and Charlotte find Keith onstage performing to an invisible audience. Lee and Charlotte play along with the invisible judges to keep Keith's trip from turning bad.

This is the first time we see Lee and Charlotte work together well. Convinced he's made it to Hollywood, Keith celebrates briefly before being distracted by the lights and colors on the huge screen behind him. He's transfixed, laying on the stage staring at it in awe. "Come see this, you guys!"

Lee and Charlotte reluctantly join him, laying on the stage next to him.

44. INT. ARENA – CONTESTANT HOLDING ROOM - DAY

Martin tells Eileen that she should be happy that she was even able to audition since he didn't get a chance to go. He ends up revealing to Eileen that it was in fact Lee who worked the audio booth and "screwed up" her performance.

Eileen points the gun at Martin. "Your little friend better get back soon."

45. INT. ARENA – STAGE AREA - DAY

Lee and Charlotte lay onstage with Keith who blabs nonsense: "Do you dream in color?" Lee: "I dream in 3D", Lee looks over at the gun lying next to them. He signals with his eyes to Charlotte.

Slowly, he moves his hands to the gun while trying to keep Keith's rant going. Just as Lee is sliding the gun away... Keith POPS up and grabs it. He points it at them and tells them to start walking.

46. INT. ARENA HALLWAY - DAY

As they walk with the carts of food down the hallway, Keith is slowly recovering, though still a little woozy. Lee whispers to Charlotte and opens his closed hand, revealing bullets. He's managed to empty the gun.

47. INT. ARENA – CONTESTANT HOLDING ROOM - DAY

They return to the holding room and Eileen immediately notices that Keith is acting odd. Keith points at Lee and Charlotte “They did something to me!” A still high Keith turns around and sees the marked up Lyss Phillips cut out and let’s out a squeal. He freaks out, complaining that the heat in the room is making him have a panic attack. Eileen allows him to cut free the duct tape covering one of the vents, to everyone’s relief.

Eileen is pretty fed up with Lee and harasses him for playing her song a few seconds late, blaming him for her bad performance. So Lee totally looks like the bad guy in having inadvertently orchestrated the wrath of both rejects. Lee tells her it’s not his fault a fly was buzzing around her face.

Midpoint: Eileen wants Lee to bring her Aldo Vega himself. Lee: “But you can ask for anything, why don’t you the police to bring him here?” Eileen: “I could. But maybe I want to give it a *few seconds*. Maybe I want to put you through hell first.”

Charlotte, worried about Lee, offers to go in his stead. Eileen refuses. Eileen: “And if you care about her. I wouldn’t dilly dally, Sally. Or I’ll use her as an example of what happens when I don’t get what I want.”

Lee, giving one last sad look at Charlotte, heads away on his doomed mission.

48. EXT. ARENA PARKING LOT - DAY

Lee finds the judges trailers heavily guarded. Security won’t let him pass though he tries to explain that he desperately needs to talk to Aldo.

He explains that he was one of the hostages. Security brings out Jonah, who is not really happy to see Lee again. “Look, I don’t really have time for this. You weren’t even one of the hostages, I saw you outside the building.”

Lee speaks to Captain Blaylock who asks Lee to confirm what went on during the conversation between him and Eileen. But Lee wasn’t in the room for that convo. “I was getting food for everyone, I wasn’t around.” No one buys the fact that Keith and Eileen wouldn’t ask for Aldo themselves without sending Lee.

49. EXT. ARENA PARKING LOT – TRAILERS - DAY

Time for desperate measures. Lee overhears Aldo arguing with his security guard who won’t let him step outside to smoke a cigarette. “It’s not safe, sir.” Lee hides as

Aldo props open a canopy window and puffs from a cigarette like it's a teat. (Actually, he just smokes it regularly.)

50. INT. ALDO'S TRAILER – DAY

Aldo, smoking a cigarette at the window, gets a call and steps away from the window and into his bathroom.

51. EXT. ARENA PARKING LOT – TRAILERS - DAY

Lee stares at the open window, scheming.

52. INT. CONTESTANT HOLDING ROOM - DAY

Meanwhile, Charlotte can't hide her worry. Martin consoles her. "Don't worry, the last thing Lee will do is let you get hurt." Charlotte: "It's not me I'm worried about."

Martin: "He'll be okay." They share a moment of silence. "He really likes you, you know? God, that sounded like I passed you a note under the desk in high school. This is high school shit. But whatever. He likes you."

53. EXT. ARENA PARKING LOT – TRAILERS - DAY

Lee sneaks up to Aldo's trailer and props open the window further. He grabs the top of the trailer and pushes his body feet first inside, sliding in clumsily.

54. INT. ALDO'S TRAILER - DAY

Lee overhears Aldo talking on the phone while taking a shit. ALDO (on phone): "No, I'm not shitting, I don't know what you're talking about."

Lee hears a guard coming and hides underneath a leather sofa. Aldo exits the bathroom and complains about the guard bothering him. The guard shuts the window and tells him to be more careful before stepping back outside.

Aldo finds Lee and Lee, unconvincingly, pretends like he has a gun underneath his shirt. Aldo: "You're just holding your hand underneath your shirt!" Aldo calls for the guard and Lee blurts out "I was one of the hostages! They're going to hurt my friend if you don't help me!"

The guard comes in and Lee hides again. Guard: "What happened?" Aldo hesitates. He looks down at Lee who silently pleads. Aldo (to the guard): "Nothing, I sneezed."

55. INT. CONTESTANT HOLDING ROOM – DAY

Martin and Charlotte or Keith and Eileen scene.

Once the guard leaves, Lee and Aldo talk. Lee: "Lyss Phillips' trailer is way better than this one." After Lee insults his trailer, Aldo hears Lee out.

Aldo adamantly wants nothing to do with the gun-wielding crazies. "All anyone ever wants is money. Once they get their grubby little fingers on it they'll be satisfied, I'm sure."

Lee: "It's bigger than that. People's lives are at stake." Lee goes on a tirade how Aldo used to care about people's futures, producing some of the best artists in the last two decades. All he wants to do is crush dreams now instead of helping them.

Aldo starts his own rant, blaming the shitty show on the producer Jonah. He claims that the industry's changed but instead of fighting against it, he admits that he just gave into it and was negative about it." After his tirade, Aldo sighs and agrees to help Lee.

56. EXT. ARENA PARKING LOT – TRAILERS - LATE AFTERNOON

They exit the trailer and SWAT teams surround them led by Captain Blaylock. "He's with me," Aldo tells them.

Lee overhears them discussing gassing the vents in order to knock the gunmen out, but Lee explains to them that all of the vents are blocked but one. Lee tells them that he can try to get them close to one of the open vents.

Captain Blaylock provides him with a device that will signal them when the captors are in position. Captain Blaylock: "These grenades, they make a little bit of noise when the gas is being released, and being inside the vent will only make them louder, so try to keep them from hearing it if you can." He wishes them luck.

57. INT. STAIRWELL – LATE AFTERNOON

Lee and Aldo arrive at the door and peek inside. To their dismay, they see all of the hostages huddled underneath the open vent soaking up the little bit of cool air.

Aldo: "Got a backup plan?" Lee: "Only Eileen has a loaded gun. I emptied Keith's earlier." We could 'Harry Potter' you into the room and-" Aldo: "Wait. What the hell are you talking about?" Lee explains that they pretend like he's knocked out and

bring him into the room. He tells him that Keith's gun is empty, and once Eileen is distracted one of them can grab her gun and put a stop to it.

58. INT. CONTESTANT HOLDING ROOM – LATE AFTERNOON

Lee walks into the hostage room carrying Aldo in his arms. Keith and Eileen revel in their new captive.

Suddenly, Aldo springs up and knocks Eileen to the ground. Charlotte, nearby, kicks the loose gun away. Keith points at Aldo and FIRES knocking him to the ground.

Turns out they switched guns earlier and Eileen picked up the empty gun. Eileen repeatedly beats and kicks Lee for once again planning to stop them. She isn't too pleased with Charlotte either for kicking her gun away.

59. EXT. ARENA PARKING LOT – LATE AFTERNOON

A SWAT guy informs Captain Blaylock that they've lost all communications with Lee.

60. INT. CONTESTANT HOLDING ROOM – LATE AFTERNOON

Low point: Aldo is injured and all the hostages are still trapped. Their plan was a failure. Keith and Eileen force Aldo to get on a laptop and wire money to their accounts.

Meanwhile, Lee and Charlotte chat. He shows her the device that the swat patrol gave him, now shattered from the altercation. They reminisce and joke about how all their friends they grew up with are settled down and married.

He admits to her that when he left her it was because he was scared that they both hadn't lived enough of their lives outside of each other. "I always thought we'd eventually get back together."

Charlotte explains that they can't just pick up where things had left off and that things have changed. "I think it's too late for us," she tells him. Lee is completely defeated.

Lee: "You're right. I shouldn't have ever gotten you in this mess. I was looking to you to fix my shitty life. As if I could just pick up from four years ago and be happy again." He admits to her what he said to Martin, about not giving up until he gave it his everything. "I told myself I was going to visit your parents even though they hate me. I was gonna do whatever it takes. But who was I kidding?" Lee gets up to get some space. He pauses. "Wait, where is Martin?"

ACT THREE

61. EXT. INDOOR ARENA PARKING LOT – LATE AFTERNOON

Martin's managed to make it outside. He finds one of the security guards he and Lee freed from earlier getting checked up in the back of an ambulance.

Guard: "What happened?"

Martin: "Long story. We got taken hostage and then one of the gunmen tripped out on acid and then Aldo Vega got shot and I snuck out."

The guard is shocked. Martin convinces him to let him borrow his security uniform.

62. INT. CONTESTANT HOLDING ROOM – LATE AFTERNOON

Lee is downtrodden, sitting alone.

While Keith and Eileen are distracted, Aldo, now tied up with an extension cord, calls both Lee and Charlotte closer. He tells them that they have to get Eileen and Keith close to the vents. Lee informs him that the signal device is broken. Aldo thinks. "There's still a way. You could call them."

Lee: "They took everyone's cells." Aldo: "But *they* still have their own phones." Lee just wants to give up. Lee: "Look every time I try to help I just screw things up worse. I'm just gonna lay low until this blows over." Aldo: "Blows over? I got shot! I need to get the hell out of here: a) before they decide to cap somebody else and b) so I can seek some medical attention!"

Charlotte eyes the room. She notices that speakers are set up right in position underneath the target air vent. "Okay, I've got an idea," she says, looking at Lee for support. He shakes his head. Charlotte: "Well, I'm doing it with or without you."

Lee watches as she talks Eileen into getting the audition she wanted to have, without anything hindering her performance. She refuses to do it accapella but Charlotte tells her she can set up the laptop to play whatever song she wants.

Aldo looks over to Lee and whispers: "Pussy." Lee: "What?" Aldo: "Help her, you twat." Lee sighs and steps up to the speakers. Eileen is suspicious. Lee: "I owe you for earlier. Let me make it up to you. I'll give you the best sound possible. It's what I do."

Lee uses a laptop to play the song. Eileen is still suspicious and orders Keith to watch Lee on the laptop closely.

Keith watches and doesn't see anything fishy. Eileen begins performing, clearing out the hostages from her performing area, and putting her in perfect position underneath the only open vent.

Aldo is forced to sit and watch her perform. While Keith watches her perform poorly, trying to show support, Lee manages to snatch Keith's cell from his jacket pocket. He dials 911 but Keith approaches again and he's forced to drop the phone to the floor. "Hello? Hello?" calls a voice from the phone.

63. INT. POLICE STATION – LATE AFTERNOON

A woman at a police station traces the phone's call. She sees that it's the arena where the hostage situation is going down. "Oh my, God." She begins to transfer the call. "Captain Blaylock? Come in, Captain."

64. EXT. INDOOR ARENA PARKING LOT – LATE AFTERNOON

Martin, outside, now donning the baggy security uniform, overhears Captain Blaylock get a phone call. Wide-eyed, he puts the call on speakerphone. "We've got ears inside." During the commotion, Martin slips inside Lyss Phillips' villa of a trailer.

65. INT. LYSS PHILLIPS TRAILER – LATE AFTERNOON

Martin tiptoes around the ridiculously nice trailer. Flat-screen TVs everywhere, leather furniture, a pool table, Jacuzzi.

He sits at a table and pulls a joint from inside his shoe, one he managed to keep hidden from Keith and Eileen. Lyss walks out and spots him. He tells her he's her new security guard. She eyes the weed, intrigued. He holds up the joint. "Want some?"

66. INT. CONTESTANT HOLDING ROOM – LATE AFTERNOON

Meanwhile, Eileen continues performing. Keith asks Lee to let him perform next. "Well, get up there. Her song's almost done." Keith giddily walks over by Eileen.

They're both in position! Aldo slides the phone to Lee with his foot and Lee bends over to tie his shoe, speaking into the receiver: "If anybody can hear me. Gas dat ass." "What was that? Can you repeat?" "Just send the gas! They're in position!"

67. EXT. INDOOR ARENA PARKING LOT – LATE AFTERNOON

Captain Blaylock grabs his walkie and commands “Boys...smoke ‘em.” MAN ON WALKIE: “What was that?” Officer: “Just send in the gas!”

68. INT. CONTESTANT HOLDING ROOM – LATE AFTERNOON

After Eileen’s performance, Lee quickly switches songs to Keith’s song in order to drown out the sound of the HISSING gas grenade. Eileen demands that he stop the music so she can get the feedback she’s longed for from Aldo. He hesitates. She points the gun at him. Lee reluctantly silences the music.

Eileen hears a hissing noise and traces the noise to the vents and sniffs. “Shit. It’s gas!” She covers her mouth and shoots open the glass window nearby.

Eileen: “Plan B! Everybody up! Move! We’re getting out of here.” Keith and Eileen begin marching the hostages out. “Don’t even think about running. Move slow.”

Keith takes a tied-up Aldo over his shoulder. As Lee approaches to exit, Eileen stops him. “Not you. I’ve had enough of your shit.” She bashes him over the head with the butt of her gun, knocking him to the floor and leaving him behind. “Hey, the knockout thing worked this time!” she excitedly tells Keith as they leave, who responds with a high-five.

69. EXT. INDOOR ARENA PARKING LOT – LATE AFTERNOON

Captain Blaylock and the police watch as Keith and Eileen exit the building with the hostages filing out in a row. They break off from the crowd and Eileen uses Charlotte as a human shield and Keith still carries Aldo slung over his shoulder. They make for Lyss Phillips huge celebrity villa on wheels.

70. INT. CONTESTANT HOLDING ROOM – LATE AFTERNOON

Lee wakes, coughing. Through the window, he looks down to parking lot and spots Eileen holding Charlotte hostage. He sees Eileen and Charlotte get into the driver’s part of the eighteen-wheeler and Keith drag Aldo into the actual trailer. Lee has to get to her before they leave! Acting fast, he snatches up the Lyss Phillips life-size cardboard cutout...

71. EXT. BALCONY – LATE AFTERNOON

Lee takes the cutout and takes a deep breath. He uses it to slide down the sloped roof of the building outside. He flies off the building at way more quickly of a speed than he anticipated

72. EXT. INDOOR ARENA PARKING LOT – LATE AFTERNOON

Lee lands straight on the windshield of a cop car, shattering it. Dazed and beat up he hops up and rushes toward the hijacked trailer.

73. INT. LYSS PHILLIPS TRAILER – LATE AFTERNOON

Meanwhile Keith searches inside the huge trailer. He finds Martin and Lyss in bed together and kicks them out.

74. EXT. INDOOR ARENA PARKING LOT – LATE AFTERNOON

Lee runs up just as Martin and Lyss are shoved out the trailer's back door. He pauses to look at them. Martin smiles big and points at Lyss Phillips and mouths "We boned!" Lee rushes after the trailer and slips into the cracked open door at its back.

75. INT. LYSS PHILLIPS TRAILER – LATE AFTERNOON

Lee walks right into Keith pointing a gun at him. "You don't know when to quit, kid." Lee: "You should have quit last year!" Keith's about to pull the trigger, when Aldo bites his ankle. Lee runs up and tackles Keith and the gun is knocked loose. They wrestle throughout the trailer.

Eventually, they're hanging out the side door of the trailer on the verge of falling out.

Eileen, in the passenger seat while Charlotte drives, spots in the side mirror Lee and Keith hanging out the trailer. She rolls down her window and leans out aiming at Lee.

Keith sees her and protests: "What are you doing?! Don't shoot! You're going to hit me!" Eileen squints, in the zone. "I got him." Right when she's about to shoot, Charlotte swerves the vehicle and Eileen's shot strays, hitting a tire and causing the trailer to fish tail! Keith and Lee fall back inside the trailer as it comes loose and plummets downhill!

Meanwhile the cab flies off the road and through a barrier Charlotte brakes just before the trailer tips over the edge of a cliff! Eileen is still dazed hanging out of the

window, her gun on the ground below her.. When she starts stirring, Charlotte rolls up the window to trap her. Charlotte is briefly relieved. Suddenly, the cab starts teetering over the edge. Eileen, trapped in the window, turns to Charlotte, pleading. "Please! You've gotta let me out!" Charlotte hesitates. The cab rumbles as it comes closer to falling. Charlotte quickly rolls down the window before hopping out the door.

Eileen falls to the ground just as the cab rolls off the cliff. She crawls to the gun laughing. "Big mistake." Just as her hand touches the gun Charlotte's foot steps on it before kicking the gun away. "Sing, fatty. It's over." Eileen: "What? I'm not fat!" Charlotte: "Shut up." Cop cars pull up. Eileen is under arrest.

The trailer lies ravaged downhill on the side of the road. Crowds of people are gathered around Charlotte slowly approaches, terrified. The door pops open. And out limps a beat up Lee helping Aldo down out of the trailer. Everyone cheers. Charlotte hugs Lee.

The police find Keith trapped underneath a pool table.

When Jonah approaches Aldo, happy to find him alive, Aldo fires Jonah. Blaming him for the shit show they've been running. "I'm gonna start a new show. Do it right." He turns to Lee and Charlotte. "What do you two say? Care to join me?" Lee and Charlotte look at each other, shocked. Aldo: "Think it over."

Before Lee and Charlotte can talk, Jonah pleads with them, begging them to let him stay on the project. "I'll do anything," he says. Lee thinks it over: "Sing for it?" Jonah starts singing an awful rendition of "Kiss from a Rose" while Lee and Charlotte talk.

Lee: "Look, you're right. We can't just pick up where we left off. But the thought of getting to know you all over again is exciting. Let's just... be friends." Charlotte: "Right. Friends." She smiles and they hug. Lee: "Your hair smells nice." Charlotte: "You still use that same body wash?"

They end up making out. Jonah's awful singing fades into the real deal Seal song.

Fade out.

THE END

Appendix B: Short Outline

THE WORLD OF THE STORY

The majority of the story takes place in the Phillips Arena in Atlanta, Georgia where a worldwide phenomenon reality TV singing competition called *Shut Up and Sing* is in town for the weekend. Sleazy paparazzi are staked out for celeb sightings. A packed audience consisting of screaming tweens and bored parents is juxtaposed to delusional parents of contestants who swear their child is Beiber's second coming.

Looking to keep their TV ratings reign, this year the producers of the show reached out to the seediest surrounding small towns near Atlanta including Nelson, Georgia (the protagonist's home town) hoping to lure the worst of the worst misguided fools looking for fame.

Such small town lifestyle is in direct contrast with the celebrity judges of the show, who ride around in trailers the size of villas. In fact, the climax takes place in one of these trailers, involving the protagonist fighting a gunman over pool tables, waterbeds, and even through a Jacuzzi as the behemoth barrels through the city.

THE CHARACTERS

LEE (23) – the protagonist whose goal is to win back his ex-girlfriend. He broke up with her when he got to college because he wanted to explore dating other girls and take advantage of four years of opportunities. However, five years later, he's a miserable airport bartender in Atlanta, right in the back yard of his deadbeat hometown of Nelson, Georgia believing that bad karma has ruined his life. When a singing competition that his ex works on called *Shut Up and Sing* comes to town for the weekend, he sneaks his way on as a contestant hoping to sing his way to her heart and atone for what he sees to have been a grievous error from his past. After all, Charlotte used to be the one who motivated and pushed Lee, and he needs that push now more than ever...

CHARLOTTE (22) – the love interest of the protagonist. Unlike Lee, she's come to terms with their breakup and the opportunities it granted her. Instead of her initial plan of following Lee to UGA, she instead left Georgia behind and attended college at USC, eventually rising in the ranks of television production to her current status of assistant director on *Shut Up and Sing*. Though, she still resents Lee for the abruptness of their breakup and his vague reasoning behind it, she treats that part of her life as a separate experience and a youthful mistake. She's changed a lot since Lee's last seen her, earning brownie points by having a

direct hand in providing the show's producers with the perfect place to find pathetic people who would make for TV gold: her old derelict hometown. She's cold, calculated and is looking to do whatever it takes to keep climbing the ladder straight to the top.

MARTIN (25) – an almost too friendly contestant who, like Lee, entered the competition with ulterior motives. He doesn't intend to sing, but instead plans to snap provocative shots of pop star and judge of *Shut Up and Sing*, LYSS PHILLIPS, in the hopes of selling them off to the highest bidder. Though he means well, his antics only seem to get Lee into more trouble.

EILEEN (28) – Scantly-clad, screeching contestant. This is her second year in a row of rejection, and she's convinced that the judges invited her back just to humiliate her again. She decides to give them a heavy dose of the crazy they were looking for, formulating the plan with her boyfriend to take the competition by force. In her twisted mind, she's convinced that she can land herself a record deal at gunpoint.

KEITH (32) – A nitwit whipped boyfriend of Eileen who will do anything for his love. He's desperate for the money and will do anything to get it. She wears the pants and often berates him for cowardice and weakness, so he's really looking for a chance to show off his manliness and impress his sweetie pie.

ALDO VEGA (48) – A music mogul who produced some of the best artists in the industry during the 80's. Has become bitter in the twilight of his career, taking a job as a judge on a singing competition show, and also taking pleasure in crushing the dreams of contestants. He desperately seeks to stay relevant in Hollywood, and finds that his asshole image on TV is a simple shortcut to that goal.

TESS (31) – Jerk producer of the show who also has a thing for Charlotte. (Charlotte often plays along, innocently flirting back with no intention of anything ever happening between them.) Tess will do anything to get the best possible television, and is fully aware that a hostage crisis episode, if properly promoted, would kick some serious ratings ass when the show airs.

CAPTAIN BLAYLOCK (52) – noble APD captain called in to handle the hostage situation. Butts heads with Tess, who seems to want the drama inside the arena to continue.

ACT I

Cameras equipped, a boisterous CROWD waits near rope-barricaded and security-guarded trailers set up outside the Phillips arena in Atlanta for a singing

competition called *Shut Up and Sing*. SCREAMS erupt as the door of a HUGE, three story villa of a trailer opens. From inside emerges... LEE (23), jeans and a raggedy t-shirt ... far from famous. The crowd's sigh of disappointment practically knocks Lee off his feet. A security guard shoves Lee back into a line of contestants.

Lee smokes a joint with a contestant named MARTIN (24) who reveals to Lee that he entered himself in the competition, not intending to sing, but instead planning to snap provocative shots of pop star and judge of the show LYSS PHILLIPS (19) in the hopes of selling them off to the highest bidder. Martin opts for a port-o-potty instead of trying the trailer, and Lee convinces him that he shouldn't risk dirtying his contestant credentials, offering to hold them for him. Martin agrees. With Martin's credentials, Lee enters the arena as a contestant.

Lee witnesses the show's jerk of a producer TESS (31), humiliating and firing interns, making sure to steer clear of her wrath.

Lee manages to find Charlotte and tells her that he had to see her before the tour took her to another city the next day. Charlotte is shocked to see Lee with a contestant badge since a) she knows he can't carry a tune and b) the badge features a name other than his own. Charlotte threatens to let the producers know what he's up to, hoping to get him kicked out a.s.a.p. Lee lies and says he came in place of a coworker who backed out, and begs her to let him sing. Charlotte only agrees so she can enjoy watching him make a fool of himself. Tess shows up demanding that Lee return to the holding room with the rest of the contestants. A bit of flirtation between Charlotte and Tess leaves Lee a little confused, but mostly jealous.

Meanwhile, Martin finagles his way inside the building to try and put a stop to Lee's treachery. He gets distracted when he spots Lyss Phillips approaching the bathroom with her bodyguards. Trying to recreate a photo of Jessica Simpson on the toilet eating a burrito that sold for 2 mil, Martin fails to get racy photos of Lyss Phillips in the bathroom and instead winds up with his phone drowned in the toilet.

The competition kicks off and one of the judges, music mogul producer ALDO VEGA (48) takes pleasure in destroying the hopes and dreams of outlandish contestants. Judge #2 Lyss Phillips struggles to string together sentences. And the third judge RITA BURKE (63), soul singer legend, spends more time eating than she does giving contestants advice.

Martin informs security that Lee is an imposter. Spotting the guards coming for him, Lee rushes to stage for his one shot, bumping the performance of another scantily-clad contestant EILEEN (28). Lee dedicates his performance to a love

that he should have never let go, which earns him a resounding “awwwww” from the crowd. He then goes on to wail out a terrible rendition of “Kiss From a Rose” by Seal.

Backstage, Tess informs the judges to let Lee the phony and his poor singing slide since the crowd seems to like his story, and he could make for good TV. Charlotte protests that he isn’t even really a contestant, but Tess doesn’t seem to care, believing that even if the love story wears thin his terrible voice will still prove entertaining in the next round and they can dump him then. Tess has no idea that the “love story” involves Charlotte, who certainly isn’t looking to bring any more attention to herself.

Inciting Incident: Flustered from being bumped, Eileen follows Lee’s successful performance with a terrible one, spending more time breathing into the microphone trying to dance than actually singing. She winds up severely berated by Aldo onstage.

Backstage, she takes her frustration out on her klutz annoyingly adoring boyfriend named KEITH (32), who tries his best to console her backstage, reminding her about their plan B. Eileen opens her enormous makeup bag, revealing two handguns concealed at its bottom...

Lee watches from backstage as Martin, who is still able to perform since his name wasn’t used, takes the stage and is eventually escorted away by security guards when he “accidentally” knocks Lyss’s glass of water all over her chest and tries to snap a photo.

Progressive Complications: Lee, Martin, and the audience/judges watch the huge screen behind the performance stage in horror as Eileen and Keith wield handguns and hold a room full of contestants and crew (including Charlotte) hostage demanding the show’s five million dollar prize and a record deal. The building is quickly evacuated. During the frenzy, Rita Burke has a heart attack and dies.

CAPTAIN BLAYLOCK (52) arrives on the scene with a team of policemen.

Act One Break: After realizing that Tess has no intentions of helping the hostages, but is instead more focused on making sure cameras inside catch all of the action, Lee works up the courage to sneak back into the building to rescue Charlotte. Screw the singing. *This* is what he needs to win Charlotte’s heart. Martin agrees to tag along with him, but only if Charlotte can get him access to Lyss Phillips.

ACT II

Once back inside, Lee and Martin devise a plan to sneak Charlotte out of the contestant holding room. Lee tosses a walkie down a vent that leads into the room and has Martin yell into another walkie as a distraction. Martin really gets into it, much to Keith and Eileen's annoyance. They desperately try to find the source of the noise. Keith, who's shorter than Eileen, puts her on his shoulders so she can reach the vent, but he's too weak and she makes sure to harass him for it. Meanwhile, a stealthy Lee manages to nearly sneak Charlotte out of the room full of hostages, but their plan is foiled when Martin's cell phone makes an unfortunate recovery from its soaked toilet trip, RINGING and giving them away. Lee and Martin wind up hostages.

Gloating in having captured Lee and Martin, Keith makes them empty their pockets. He eats from a box of heart candy that Martin had on him and tapes up every vent in the room, making sure that no attempts are made again to stop them. Eileen is thrilled to have caught Lee, partially blaming him for her bad performance when he stole her spotlight onstage. She humiliates both Lee and Charlotte, realizing after his recue attempt that Charlotte is the girl for whom Lee sang. Some of the bored hostages in the room eat up the juicy scoop like it's a soap opera. A few hostages ask Eileen if the rumors are true that she killed Rita Burke. Lying and trying to strike fear in the hearts of her captives, she takes full responsibility for the judge's demise.

Lee and Charlotte argue while Martin frantically tries to get their attention, keeping a nervous eye on Keith who seems to be growing more sweaty and pale with each passing minute. Charlotte's upset with Lee for showing up and making a mess out of everything he touches. She accuses him of having no real drive, having always relied on her to make his decisions for him.

Meanwhile, outside, Captain Blaylock keeps the pestering paparazzi at bay and demands info from Tess on the contestant Eileen. Tess reluctantly hands it over.

Martin, finally able to get Lee's attention, tells him that it was no ordinary heart candy that Keith chomped on. One piece that read "Have Fun" was laced with a tiny drop of acid. Martin explains that he was planning on slipping it to Lyss Phillips so that he could get golden photos of her tripping balls.

Keith expresses that he's lightheaded. Lee, trying to get Keith and his gun away from everyone before the trip kicks in, offers to take him to the craft services room and get food for everyone. Charlotte claims that she knows the area better. They bicker. Keith, annoyed, demands that they both come with him. Eileen warns them to return quickly or else, pointing her gun threateningly at Martin.

While on a food mission to the craft services room, Keith officially begins to freak out, fascinated by every light, color, and sound in the building. Lee and Charlotte are forced to work together to get the lunatic Keith back to the holding room before Eileen suspects something is awry and hurts someone.

Meanwhile, in the contestant holding room, Eileen makes first contact with the police. She demands that Aldo meets them in person and wire five million dollars into their accounts. Most importantly, she demands that he signs a record deal for her. Blaylock asks if she can assure them that Aldo will not be harmed. She isn't very convincing. Martin and some other contestants complain about the taped up vents and the room's scorching temperature.

Lee and Charlotte manage to coax a hyper Keith into laying down. They're forced to play therapist as Keith blabs about dreams and his poor performance lately in the bedroom with Eileen. Noticing the gun lying at Keith's side, Lee smoothly tries to make a grab for it while Charlotte keeps him distracted. Just as he gets his hands on it, Keith SNAPS out of his trance and snatches the gun back ordering them to walk back to the holding room. Gun at their backs, they march back to the room. Lee gets Charlotte's attention and shows her bullets in his clenched fist. He managed to empty the gun. Charlotte is impressed.

Meanwhile Captain Blaylock meets with Aldo and Lyss Phillips, warning them that they may have to personally visit the hostage-takers in order for there to be successful negotiation. They refuse, believing that they killed Rita Burke and would do the same to them if they had the chance.

When Lee and Charlotte return Keith to the hostage room, Eileen notices Keith's loopy state and blames Lee, with whom she already has beef. Keith freaks out from the heat in the room and tears open one of the vents, much to the relief of the sweaty, miserable hostages.

Midpoint: To punish Lee for repeatedly being a thorn in her side, Eileen sends him on a doomed mission: to find and bring cruel judge Aldo Vega to her himself so that she can personally return the favor of humiliation. (Even though she could request anything from the police, she'd prefer to make Lee suffer first.) She threatens to hurt Charlotte if Lee doesn't manage the impossible task in thirty minutes.

In the parking lot where cops and crowds of reporters are gathered, Lee tries to explain the situation to Tess and police officers, but no one buys that he's one of the hostages, since he's already been known to fake his identity and since he was seen outside when the commotion first began. Tess is too busy trying to stall Captain Blaylock and the SWAT team he's called in. Lee is left no other choice but to sneak his way into Aldo's trailer.

Meanwhile, Martin consoles Charlotte who is worried about Lee (she's mostly worried that he'll screw things up and she'll end up killed.) Martin gets a little history from Charlotte about her and Lee's past relationship. Charlotte's still convinced he's desperate and just looking to use her because he's lost, but Martin swears he's never seen someone more sorry for a mistake in his life. Eileen ends up in a scuffle with a rapper who mouths off about missing his opportunity to perform. During the mayhem, Keith and Eileen accidentally switch guns...

After barely preventing Aldo from calling security, Lee lays a speech on him, reminding a stubborn Aldo of the amazing collaborations he had with some of the most talented artists of his generation. Lee convinces Aldo to help out and redeem himself. They form a plan with Captain Blaylock and the SWAT team to stop Keith and Eileen before their power trip gets even more out of control. Lee informs them about the one open vent leading into the holding room. Captain Blaylock suggests that they try and get Eileen and Keith close to that vent and keep everyone else away. He hands Lee a device to signal them with when they should send in gas grenades to take them out.

As Lee escorts Aldo back to the holding room, he remembers Keith's empty gun and decides that there may be an easier way to stop Eileen and Keith... Lee carries a "captured" Aldo (faking as though he's been knocked out) into the hostage room, much to Eileen's pleasure. When Eileen has her back turned, Aldo SPRINGS up and KNOCKS her off her feet, kicking her gun away. To which Keith quickly responds by SHOOTING Aldo in the shoulder with his not-so-empty gun.

Low point: Their plan falls apart: During the scuffle, Martin tries to escape via elevator only to be shot at and fall down an empty shaft to his doom. The device to signal the police is destroyed when Eileen lays the smack down on a yet again subordinate Lee. Eileen and Keith force Aldo to wire money to their account.

Lee is physically and emotionally beat up. He feels responsible for Aldo's injury and Martin's death. Aldo reveals to Lee that Charlotte is responsible for *Shut Up and Sing* even deciding to come to Atlanta this year. Disappointed and already downtrodden by his series of failures, Lee conveys to Charlotte that he thought the tons of ads for the show in Nelson, Georgia were a sign, beckoning for him to come to find her, as if it were his destiny. Delusion led him to believe she wanted to see him. He realizes now that the ads were evidence of Charlotte's influence on Tess, the show's producer. He accuses her of telling Tess all about her derelict hometown from which a barrage of freak show contestants ripe for humiliation would come running in the hopes of making it big. He realizes that to her he's just another loser like the rest. She tries to explain that a lot's changed

since they knew each other last, but Lee won't hear it, believing now more than ever that everything he touches indeed does turn to shit.

ACT III

Attempting to make amends for her contribution to the terrible mess they're in, Charlotte convinces Eileen to utilize the unique opportunity to get another chance to perform for Aldo. She hopes to trick Eileen and Keith into getting near the vents while she can figure out a new way to signal the SWAT team to subdue them.

Meanwhile, it turns out Martin only fell one story down onto the top of an elevator and is alive and well. He slips outside and resumes his mission for Lyss Phillips, stealing a security guard uniform and making his way toward the trailers.

Claiming that he's only doing it to try to help the rest of the hostages, Lee joins in on Charlotte's plan. He manages to snatch Keith's cell and secretly contact the police while Eileen obnoxiously sings. Once Charlotte ensures that both Eileen and Keith are in position, Lee signals for the gas. However, at the last minute Eileen catches on.

Escaping the chaotic room, Eileen knocks Lee out with the butt of her gun before she and Keith take Charlotte and Aldo at gunpoint and make for an escape outside in Lyss Phillips' absurdly gigantic, two-storied villa of a trailer. Inside, they find Martin in bed with Lyss Phillips. Turns out Martin managed to seduce the pop star with some drugs and a little smooth talk.

Climax: Lee, waking up, uses a life-size cardboard standee of Lyss Phillips, to slide down the building's sloped roof and rush to the rescue. Eileen forces Charlotte to drive in the cab while Lee wrestles with Keith in the mansion of a trailer as it speeds through the city. In order to prevent Eileen from shooting a vulnerable Lee, Charlotte WRECKS the trailer and fights the gun away from Eileen. Just as Keith is about to shoot Charlotte, Lee KICKS a hot tub loose from the second story, falling and trapping Keith. Keith and Eileen are, at last, subdued.

Resolution: Similar to the opening scene, a crowd of people wait anxiously outside the trailer (now wrecked). A limping Lee emerges from the trailer helping Aldo. The crowd CHEERS. Captain Blaylock thanks Lee for a job well done in making sure all of the hostages were safe. Aldo pulls strings and fires Tess for her mean-spirited organization of the show, assuring her days in TV are done.

Charlotte apologizes for losing sight of where she came from, but Lee explains that it's his fault for leaving her, causing her to block out a painful past. Lee tells

her that he isn't asking to pick up where they left off but looks forward to the opportunity to get to know her all over again. A civil hug of agreement brings all of their old feelings rushing back and they can't resist the urge to smooch!

Aldo, owing them for saving him, offers them anything they ask. Lee tells Aldo he's got an idea for a show...

Cut to: Lee and Charlotte as producers on the set of *Rise and Shine*, a show that cultivates the talents of small town landlocked kids, helping them (sincerely) chase after their dreams. The kids are thrilled by a guest celebrity appearance of none other than Lyss Phillips along with her paparazzi-plagued boyfriend Martin.

THEME

The main themes of the story include the definition of success, the abuse of power, and coming to terms with guilt. Everyone in the story starts out inherently evil. Charlotte, Aldo, and Tess (all producers on *Shut Up and Sing*) have acquired a certain level of power and success in the entertainment industry, but at what cost? Their job is to humiliate and wreck the dreams of people on national television. In the same sense, a victim of that humiliation (Eileen) gains power by a criminal means and wind up abusing it as well, hurting innocent people. No one working in reality television initially dreamed of making a career out of it, so, in a sense, the producers of the show are just as much rejects as Eileen. Much like his antagonist, Lee hopes to find success before he fades away into a life of mediocrity, but he suffers from turmoil and regret. Though in denial at first, Charlotte comes to feel guilty for her hand in the whole incident and by the end of the story, success for Lee and Charlotte means something else entirely. Learning selflessness, they make amends for their mistakes and are simply happy to be a part of each other's lives again. Essentially, by the end, Lee goes from zero to hero.

Appendix C: The Pitch Version

There's no denying that reality singing competition shows like American Idol, The Voice and The X Factor dominate TV ratings, especially the episodes spent humiliating these delusional outlandish contestants who have no chance. Well, the world of my screenplay centers around that very phenomenon.

It's about a guy who signs up for a reality singing competition called *Shut Up and Sing* in the hopes of winning back his ex girlfriend who works on the show, but he's forced center stage when a humiliated and rejected contestant takes the everyone hostage.

My story takes place in Atlanta, Georgia, the weekend TV's biggest reality singing competition comes to town. The show is called *Shut Up and Sing*. Paparazzi's lined up outside to get photos of the celebrity judges, Screaming tweens and bored parents fill the arena. It's chaos.

A contestant named LEE hopes to sing his way back into the heart of his ex-girlfriend from high school CHARLOTTE who works as a production manager on the show.

Well, Charlotte isn't too fond of Lee and the vague reasoning he had for leaving her four years ago, so she orders that Lee gets removed from the building before he can sing. Lee flees from security and takes the stage in one desperate attempt. By doing so, he bumps the performance of another contestant EILEEN.

Partially because of Lee flustering her, Eileen's performance goes terribly, and she ends up humiliated and berated by the show's Simon Cowell of a judge, music mogul producer ALDO VEGA.

Well, Eileen is none too pleased and she and her doting, squatty boyfriend KEITH take a room full of contestants and crew hostage at gun point demanding the show's 5 million dollar cash prize as well as a record deal. Charlotte is among the hostages.

While police try to put a stop to the situation in the arena, TESS, the show's producer, who will do anything to get the best possible television, is fully aware that a hostage crisis episode, if properly promoted, would be ratings gold when the show airs. So, she wants the cameras to keep rolling.

Lee says screw the singing. Rescuing Charlotte from being a hostage is what he really needs to win her back.

Well, Lee's hair-brained rescue attempt fails and he winds up a hostage himself, and is forced to face the wrath of the lunatics Eileen and Keith. Eileen hates Lee for bumping her performance. And subsequently Charlotte is upset with Lee for partially being responsible for getting them in this mess.

When Keith accidentally takes a hallucinogen, Lee and Charlotte have to work together to keep his trip from turning ugly and endangering people's lives. In order to punish Lee, Eileen sends him on a doomed mission, to personally bring back cruel judge Aldo Vega to her so that she can return the favor of humiliation. If Lee doesn't accomplish the impossible task in thirty minutes, Eileen promises that Charlotte will be her first hostage victim.

Outside the arena, Lee manages to sneak into Aldo's trailer and they talk it out. Lee reminds Aldo of the days when he used to actually help singers as a producer rather than crushing their dreams. He gets through to him and Aldo agrees to help.

They formulate a plan with the police to get Eileen and Keith near an open vent so that they can gas them.

Well, the plan falls apart and Aldo Vega winds up shot in the shoulder. He's forced to wire 5 million into Eileen's account and worse: suffer through her performing for him all over again.

Having failed on multiple accounts now, Lee is downtrodden. He's even more upset to find out that Charlotte was responsible for recruiting the freakshow contestants for this year's show. He realizes that to her he's just a loser like everyone else.

Well, guilt finally catches up with Charlotte, and she attempts to make up for her hand in the awful situation, trying to subdue Keith and Eileen herself. She fails and Eileen and Keith take Charlotte and Aldo Vega at gunpoint, planning to escape the arena. They hijack a 3-story villa celebrity trailer. Lee rushes to the rescue, and fights it out with Keith while Eileen forces Charlotte to drive in the cab as the mansion of a trailer speeds through the city.

In order to prevent Eileen from shooting a vulnerable Lee, Charlotte WRECKS the trailer and fights the gun away from Eileen. Just as Keith is about to shoot Charlotte, Lee KICKS a hot tub loose from the second story, falling and trapping Keith. Keith and Eileen are, at last, subdued.

Charlotte apologizes for letting Hollywood get to her and turning cold. Lee tells her that he isn't asking to pick up where they left off years ago but looks forward

to the opportunity to get to know her all over again. A civil hug of agreement brings all of their old feelings rushing back and they can't resist the urge to kiss!

Aldo pulls strings and fires the producer Tess for her ill-spirited organization of the show. Owing Lee and Charlotte for saving him, Aldo offers them anything they ask. Lee tells Aldo he's got an idea for a show...Cut to: Lee and Charlotte on camera as producers on the set of *Rise and Shine*, a show that cultivates the talents of small town landlocked kids, helping them sincerely chase after their dreams.

It's a story about success and the abuse of power. Producers of such shows have acquired a certain level of control and success in the entertainment industry, but at what cost? Their job is to humiliate and wreck the dreams of people on national television. Really, no one working in reality television initially dreamed of making a career out of it, so, in a sense, the producers of the show are just as much rejects as the people they humiliate.

Vita

John Gregory Bellina was born and raised in a small town in Louisiana. He received his English: Creative Writing BAS degree with a minor in Film and Media Arts at Louisiana State University. He has production experience on over a dozen sets, including riveting reality shows like *Bridezillas* and *The X-Factor* as well as cinema masterpieces such as *Battleship*. He served as a writing intern for writer/director/show-runner Rob Thomas (*Party Down*, *Veronica Mars*) during the pursuit of his MFA at UT Austin. He qualified as a semi-finalist in the Slamdance teleplay competition for a *Parks and Recreation* spec and a second rounder for both a spec and pilot in the Austin Film Festival. His feature script was in the top 15% of the 2012 Nicholl screenwriting competition.

Permanent e-mail address: jgbellina@gmail.com

This report was typed by the author.